
The Shiftless Baristo's Guide to Getting More Tips

Contributed by Eric S. Chen
Friday, 07 July 2006

There seem to be a lot of baristi, as well as store managers, who seem to take the attitude that "tips happen." I think that there are steps that baristi can take to increase their tips.

Copyright 2006 Eric S. Chen for www.BARISTO.net.

There seem to be a lot of baristi, as well as store managers, who seem to take the attitude that "tips happen." I think that there are steps that baristi can take to increase their tips.

First, let's look at the problems.

Tip pooling:

Most espresso bars pool the tips. Typically this will split among the workers at the end of the shift or of the week. This is most unfortunate. The truly great, customer-pleasing baristi have their reward diluted, and the sloths and slackers (of which, we must regretfully admit, there are some, even among our fellow baristi) are not given their due either. This communistic system causes all but deeply self-motivated baristi to gravitate toward mediocrity; and ultimately, the overall pool of tips that is available to split ends up being reduced.

Management inattention:

Store managers and company higher-ups pay little heed to tips. After all, the company does not share in customers'

largess. As a result, not much is done to study tips maximization as is done in so many other aspects of store operations, where even tiny details are endlessly analyzed to squeeze just a bit more profit out of, say, pastry arrangements or the color of store signage. The net effect is that tips are an afterthought. No one actually plans for ways to make it easy for customers to tip. No one actually follows the customer's footsteps to figure out what makes for a tipping moment.

Nevertheless, there are things that you can do. It will be easiest if you can line up your fellow baristi to support the intention and agree on the approach, but even on your own, you are not powerless.

Do a walk-through to understand tipping from the customer's perspective.

One would think, with all the mystery-shopper reviews that our employers perform, they would toss in some feedback about tips to help us out; but I for one have never seen this. The next best thing is to simulate a mystery-shopper walk-through in our own stores. Don't forget that there are new as well as repeat customers. Ask yourself these kinds of questions as you do your walk-through:

- is a tips jar present and obvious?

- Is it clear to the customer what this little box is, or do they have to think about it?

- What does the customer see (from their side of the register) that you can't, which might change their overall impression? (think of a napkin on the floor, or disheveled product displays, etc.)

- Why and when do you ("customer") want to give a tip?

- Do you feel compelled to tip? Or does tipping make you feel gracious?

Optimize the tipping environment.

Store ambience helps create the willingness to buy. It also creates the willingness to linger, and retail experts have long known that the longer people stay, the more they buy. This is one reason that every store inspection checks cleanliness

and product display standards. It stands to reason that ambience also affects tipping. So maintaining all those cleanliness and appearance standards that your store wants you to meet help you, not just the company.

I have been to Las Vegas once or twice, not for fun but on business (one of my former careers). While there, I spent some time walking through and around casinos trying to figure out why anyone would travel to the middle of the desert to throw away their money when they can do so more conveniently at home. After tiring out my legs walking around the enormous buildings, past ridiculously oversized fake-Italian statuary and over-the-top entertainment shows, it struck me that Las Vegas is built to make little people feel big; and that, feeling big, they spend big. Put more positively, treat customers like esteemed and welcome guests, and they are more likely to act out the graciousness that your regard anticipates from them. This is not fawning for tips, or manipulation, or hint-dropping. It is serving with grace, which generates gratuities (root word: grace) in return. Also, I guess that sensory overload - the coffee-aroma equivalent of Las Vegas's flashing lights and ringing bells - plays a part.

Make the jar itself gracious.

As an industry, we have created the small luxury of a quality latte or cappuccino, finely made and cleanly presented in comfortable, clean surroundings. Then we present the customer with a battered, scratched or cracked flimsy plastic box, which practically screams "Cheap! Cheap!" Worse, some stores actually place obvious locks on the boxes or show visible bolts fixing the box to the counter. Locks and bolts send the message that we don't trust you or, at best, this is a petty theft area. This inconsistency helps neither our employers nor us. A quality tips jar, perhaps one of ceramic or glass, would help to reinforce the clean, high-end coffeeshop ambience. If you must bolt it or lock it, figure out a way to hide the lock.

Seed the jar.

The shop where I work is in a suburban shopping mall. Most of our customers are casual passing customers and not regular customers of our shop. Whenever I open the store, I place folding money (not coins) in the jar - a buck or two - to set the expectation that tips are normal and generous. (No dummy, I usually have a witness note the amount, to avoid any raised eyebrows when I reclaim my seed money later.) Just as in reading the menu, customers need some guidance about tipping.

Accept non-cash tips.

When customers use a credit card or a stored-value card, how do they tip? At my store, they can't, unless they also dig out some cash. So the convenient, cash-avoiding payment method actually becomes less convenient, forcing the use of two different payment media for the same transaction when the customer wishes to tip.

Espresso shop companies: don't you see that supporting cash-card tipping will increase your profits? Customers pay for the card upfront, so you already have their cash. By permitting cash-card tipping, the customer will use up the card sooner, speeding the date when he will purchase the next cash card. Also, you will have made a way for customers to do what they want, if they were inclined to tip using their cards; and you will have increased the utility of your store gift cards, since for the first time, they will become useful for truly cashless purchases. Supporting non-cash tipping thus helps both the baristi and the espresso-bar company.

Provide the maximum number of tipping locations.

This one has really puzzled me for quite a while. I have sometimes been in stores where there are multiple cash registers and multiple cash register lines, but only one register will have a tips jar. It is as if the workers expect a customer to step out of one line, bump their way into the line with the jar, drop a tip and then get back into their own line. It won't happen!

Set up a tips jar at any location to prevent a need for the customer to take even a step or two out of their way. Consider placing small signs saying "workers share all tips" or something like that, to avoid customer confusion. Be sure to make signs of a professional appearance, as hand written signs do not support the appearance that will help you.

Make it easier for tippers to interact with the baristo, not the cash register worker.

An even bigger puzzlement is why so many espresso shops put tips jars only at the registers. Huh? You take my money, and you want a tip for that? Go back to your customer-roleplay test. When does it feel like the right time to tip - when you pay, or when you take your first sip?

It seems obvious to me that a better time to make a tips jar available is at the espresso bar or serving area rather than at (or in addition to) the cash register. This provides the opportunity for the customer's interaction with the baristo who is working the bar to affect their tipping. I find there is more interaction at the bar than at the register, because the customer does not have to make any decisions, read any menus, or finish up to get out of the next customer's way. As they wait for their drink, they are freer to interact with you, and some customers do. More of the customer's experience - and not just the drink itself - is created at the bar than at the register.

Obviously, there ought to be a tips jar at the serving area. If store rules limit the number of tipping jars, I bet that it would be better to have a tips jar at the bar than at the register. I don't have any data on this, only an opinion. If you can work out with your store manager to do a test, try it: collect tips for a week at the register only, for a week at the bar only, and for a week at both. Get the data and do the math. I would love to hear back from you to learn what you find out.

Personalize, but know when to give some distance.

In my experience, most customers appreciate a friendly comment, a smile or an innocuous greeting. People in general like it when you remember their names. All of the generic customer-service instructions we get (smile, look the customer in the eye, etc.) apply to tips boosting as well as general store behavior. However, a few customers will give you a glare if you so much as offer a drink recommendation. You know the type - the "me customer, you lackey" sort.

Finding the degree of friendliness that the specific customer feels is appropriate is a delicate matter, but one that, I believe, can help optimize your tips too. People tip when they feel like it. Put them in their comfort zone, and they may tip, or tip more - unless they are the kind which does not tip at all.

One way that I deal with customers, when I do not know their names, is to address them by title. I call every male

customer "sir." Unfortunately it does not often help much. Men in general are more stingy tippers, in my estimation. Nevertheless, it seems that men like being spoken to as if they were in authority. For women, regardless of age, I call them "Miss." Never call a woman "ma'am" especially the 30-something or 40-something women, for whom "ma'am" means their mother. Several times, middle aged women have actually thanked me for calling them "miss," then stuffed some folding money in the tips jar. Curious, isn't it? In our society it seems that men want to appear older or higher-seniority than they are, while women want to appear younger or less senior.

All told, give customers what they want, treat them well, and the tips will follow, as will repeat customers (repeat tippers). This won't turn up in a one week experiment, but may develop over time.

Your turn.

What is your tip about tips? Post a comment to this article and let's all learn something new.